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Walt Rostow, former insider, now is key witness

By Rita McWilliams
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Economic historian Walt Whitman Rostow, foreign affairs adviser to presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, developed the philosophical theory used to justify U.S. military action against North Vietnam.

Widely circulated within the Johnson administration in 1964, the "Rostow thesis" stated that externally-supported insurgencies could be stopped only by military action against the source of external support.

Mr. Rostow argued that it was crucial the United States take action to force North Vietnam to abide by the provisions of Geneva accords, which forbade foreign troops in Laos or South Vietnam.

An escalating military opposition, he said, would make the foreign supporters of the insurgency see that continued support was not worth their while.

Mr. Rostow is one of the key witnesses this week in a court trial in which Gen. William C. Westmoreland is suing CBS television for \$120 million for airing a report that accused Gen. Westmoreland of leading a "conspiracy" to under-report enemy troop levels to President Johnson as a way of continuing U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War.

Mr. Rostow has been a staunch defender of the Johnson administration's Vietnam policy, and in 1965 broadcast his views to more than 100 colleges in a "teach-in."

The "Rostow thesis" was based on his belief that stages of economic growth and decline created certain transitional

discontent that could be used by communists to gain support. It is necessary to hold off communist challenges until a country achieved full modernization or "the age of high mass consumption," which would eliminate problems that fed the insurgency.

The Economist called his economic interpretation of history, an alternative to Marxist economic theory, a "non-communist manifesto."

One of three sons in a Russian-Jewish immigrant family, Mr. Rostow studied at Oxford and received undergraduate and doctorate degrees from Yale University.

Mr. Rostow, taught briefly at Oxford University and at Cambridge University after working for the Department of State and with the Office of Strategic Services.

In 1950, he accepted a teaching position at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and was associated with MIT's Central Intelligence Agency-backed Center for International Studies until he became active in Mr. Kennedy's presidential campaign in 1960.

His views on the strategic role of the United States in the world arena were echoed in the campaign speeches that helped elect President Kennedy, and Mr. Rostow is even credited with coining the slogan, "The New Frontier."

President Johnson awarded Mr. Rostow the Medal of Freedom, the country's highest civilian honor.

At the end of the Johnson years, Mr. Rostow accepted a position as professor of economics and history at the University of Texas at Austin, and wrote an account of the U.S. role in world affairs, "The Diffusion of Power, 1957-1972."